

An Aesthetic History of Comics

Instructor: Dan Nadel

This is a class about comics as a medium for expression. It focuses on the aesthetics of comics on and beyond the page. Comics are usually taught in terms of its dominant genres (superhero) and characters (Superman, etc.). This class will cover that history minimally, in favor of a strong focus on comics as a mode of expression (discussing drawing/mark making, storytelling mechanics) and as a graphic/commercial culture that defined many pop cultural icons/idioms and in turn influenced fine artists. This course will attempt to place comics firmly within the context of visual culture in general while continually arguing for the relevance and power of the printed image.

Semester-long readings:

Tom De Haven: *Derby Dugan's Depression Funnies, Dugan Goes Underground*

Kim Deitch: *Boulevard of Broken Dreams*

McSweeney's 13

Steven Milhauser: *Little Kingdoms*

Patrick McDonnell, et al, *Krazy Kat: The Comic Art of George Herriman*

Dan Raeburn: *The Imp* 4

UNIT 1: INTRODUCTION

Week 1: Overview

Historical and thematic overview of the course. Initial discussion: Reasons, interests, favorites, requests.

Reading: Art Spiegelman, “Comix: An Idiosyncratic Historical and Aesthetic Overview,” 1988, in *Comix, Essays, Graphics and Scraps*. Chris Ware, *Introduction to McSweeney’s 13*. Handout with comics and odds and ends from DN

Viewing: The University of Brighton’s Comics resource:
<http://www.adh.bton.ac.uk/schoolofdesign/MA.COURSE/LComics.html>

UNIT 2: HISTORIES I

Week 2: Artful beginnings

Modern comics begin in the mid 19th century with the Swiss fine artist Rudolf Topffer, who created nonfiction and satiric graphic novels, and continues with Wilhelm Busch and numerous German artists who expanded the comics vocabulary. Numerous examples of 19th century work.

Weeks 3-4: The Golden Age and the Yellow Press (2 classes)

We move into the newspaper comics era and highlight the artists and comics strips that exemplify comics as a personal medium. Also discussed is comics as an essentially commercial medium, beholden to newspapers and used to boost sales. Krazy Kat, Little Nemo in Slumberland, Nancy, and numerous other strips will be discussed. We will also make a clear delineation between the comic strip and later comic book.

Readings: Patrick McDonnell, *The Art of George Herriman* (selections); John Canemaker, *Winsor McCay*, Chapter 3; “How to Read Nancy” by Mark Newgarden and Paul Karasik, *Ernie Bushmiller’s Nancy*; *Derby Dugan’s Depression Funnies*

Week 5: The Death of the Comic Strip and The Birth of the Comic Book

Peanuts and Pogo usher out the glory days of the comic strip. Superman and Batman bring the comic book to life. A discussion of the business and ideas behind superhero comic books.

Week 6: The Atomic Age

After the comic book explosion in the early 1940s, tons of small publishers sprang up, producing odd and idiosyncratic comics, many of which prefigure later experiments in

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the underground. We'll take a close look at Carl Barks, John Stanley, Harvey Kurtzman, and EC Comics.

Readings: Paul, the Horror Comics, and Dr. Wertham by Robert Warshow; Master Race: The Graphic Story as an Artform by Art Spiegelman, et al.

Week 7: Mainstream Artistry

In the 1960s and '70s a few superhero/genre based artists made real contributions to the artform, including Jack Kirby, Steve Ditko, Harry Lucey, and Ogden Whitney and their contemporaries work will be examined. Also, a discussion of 'mature' superhero comics.

Readings: The Essential Spiderman Vol. 2; The Essential Fantastic Four Vol. 3; the Return of the King, or, Identifying with Your Parents by Jonathan Lethem; Steve Ditko's Hands by Andrew Hultkrans

Week 8: The Real Underground

Underground comics came up with the late '60s counterculture (R. Crumb) and became the first comics made for their own sake and outside the confines of the pre-established industry. Autobiography, religion, sex, and drugs were all addressed frankly and with literacy.

Readings: , Rebel Visions (selections); Milo George, ed., R. Crumb (selections); Zap Comics 2 and 3; Dugan Goes Underground

UNIT 3: TANGENTS

Week 9: Comics on Canvas

The Chicago Imagists vs. New York Pop Art: Image making vs. image appropriation. What are these pictures they're creating? Do comics have to tell stories? Can a comic exist only on canvas?

Readings: Russell Bowman: "An Interview with Jim Nutt," Arts Magazine vol. 52, no. 7; Öyvind Fahlström, "The Comics as an Art," Öyvind Fahlström: Sheena Wagstaff: "Comic Iconoclasm," Comic Iconoclasm; Robert Storr, Eye Infection

Week 10: Other Kinds of Picture Narratives

What other kinds of images can function as comics do? How do they compare? Medical illustration; dance diagrams; instructional drawings. Historical precedents in medieval manuscripts.

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Viewings: A thorough viewing of The University of Brighton's online database, The Visual Telling of stories:

<http://www.adh.brighton.ac.uk/schoolofdesign/MA.COURSE/TheLectListPage.html>

UNIT 4: HISTORIES II

Week 11: The New Comics Drawing

The 70s brings art to the comics, as distinctive picture making comes to the fore and naratve takes a back seat. Gary Panter, Mark Beyer, Rory Hayes, .

Readings: Steven Heller, "The Zen of Gary Panter," in *Metropolis*, April 2001; *Jimbo* by Gary Panter; *Amy and Jordan* by Mark Beyer

Weeks 12-13: The (Long) Rise of the Graphic Novel (2 classes)

The graphic novel in fact begins in the 1920s. A look at serious long-form picture narratives from Frans Masereel to Lynd Ward to Chris Ware.

Readings: Daniel Clowes, *Eightball* #22, Frans Masereel, *Passionate Journey*). Ron Rege, Jr, *Boys*; , "Art's Father, Vladek's Son" in *A Wanderer in the Perfect City*.

UNIT 5: CAPSULE HISTORIES

Week 14: R. Crumb

A look at the history of comics through R. Crumb, the great assimilator of comics styles. psychedelia, Little Lulu, Carl Barks, George Herriman, George Cruikshank, Basil Wolverton and Harvey Kurtzman will all be examined.

Readings: Gary Groth, "The Straight Dope from R. Crumb," in *The Comics Journal* no. 121. Handout by DN consisting of comics influential on and influenced by R. Crumb, including Little Lulu, Uncle Scrooge by Carl Barks, Krazy Kat, Basil Wolverton, and Harvey Kurtzman.

UNIT 6: WRAPPING UP

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Week 15: Contemporary Issues in Comics

A class discussion of the latest trends in comics.

Readings: *McSweeney's* 13, Mat Brinkman, *Teratoid Heights*; Sammy Harkham, ed. *Kramer's Ergot* #4.